

SIBLEY'S ARMY OF THE DEAD

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# MY GRANDFATHER, DICK PREECE



**Famous Western writer tells the graphic  
and exciting story of his grandfather.**

**By: Harold Preece**

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I was only six months old when my grandfather, the famous Dick Preece, died. So I can't say I remember him, yet indirectly I did, very vividly. The character and personality of my grandfather were so deeply impressed on the minds of all who knew him that when I was a boy I heard him described so vividly that it seemed he was still a live member of the family.

I recall now that the thing that impressed those who knew him most were his gray eyes. It was said to me many times that his eyes seemed to mirror the infinite distance of those wilderness paths he had covered on foot or in the saddle from the Boone trail in Kentucky to the Comanche trails of Texas, and his lean thin face when angered, would contract into deep lines. He was a man, as all said, of few words, and when he spoke, his words edged with echoes of battles fought, of ambushes survived along the savage frontier trails. He was not a big man physically but he was a bundle of tough muscle.

Kentuckian by origin, Texas by deed and rearing, he was christened Richard Lincoln Preece at his birth in a settlement of the Cumberland Mountains during some unrecorded month of 1833. His middle name was derived from Kentucky kinsmen, the Lincolns, with one of them, twenty-years his senior being called Abraham.

Scotch-Irish Dick Preece was on one side, Scotch-Indian on the other. His father, pious, crackshot Will Preece was the best saddlemaker in Kentucky as well as a cousin if its celebrated trail blazer, Daniel Boone. His mother, Elizabeth Gideon, came from a mixed-blood Cherokee family which had wandered away from the tribe before President Andrew Jackson expelled it to Indian Territory.

Grandfather had the swarthy complexion and the natural affinity for untamed country of an Indian warrior. He'd also inherited the shrewd canniness and the dogged hardi-

ness of ancestral Highland clansmen who'd broken Saxon heads at Inverness and Bannockburn. He could outthink everybody around him.

He probably would have wound up as a feud squashing sheriff in Kentucky had not a wave of restlessness spread over the southern Appalachians caused by wild tales coming from that land known as Texas. The Texas penchant for boasting, which increased with years, was great even in those days. The land of Texas, so it was described, was fabulous, land so black and fertile that it seemed to raise its belly up to meet the gashes of the hoe and plow. The land was free, and the bigger the family, the more you could have.

The description of the vegetables was fantastic. Cabbages were said to grow to twenty pounds a head and watermelons often weighed sixty pounds. The corn was so heavy that by August it would break the corn stalks and the yield was hundreds of bushels an acre. Game was so thick that all man needed for a meal was a stick. He could then walk out of his house and knock down enough prairie chickens, quail, and wild turkeys to feed his family for a week. Cattle and horses ran wild, and any man who wanted to catch and corral them possessed them.

There was just one cure for Texas fever. That was to head out for Texas. In 1838 when grandfather was five, his father, Will Preece, decided to take the cure. He told Lizzie, the Cherokee woman, to round up the washtubs and their ever-growing family. Then, across a network of interconnecting rivers, the Preeces floating down on a fleet of log rafts to the Lone Star Republic.

Eventually they settled on a wide flowing stream twelve miles west of Austin, the shambling little village that was the young nation's capital. The stream came to be called Bull Creek after Will Preece killed a male buffalo that he

spotted drinking in its channel. A few miles from the Preece ranch lay the southern terminus of the bloody Comanche Trail with its northern end being seven hundred miles away in Western Kansas. The Comanches still claimed three-fourths of Texas as their hunting ground. Once they had raided Austin, slain and ridden off with Lone Star flags waving mockingly from their saddlehorns.

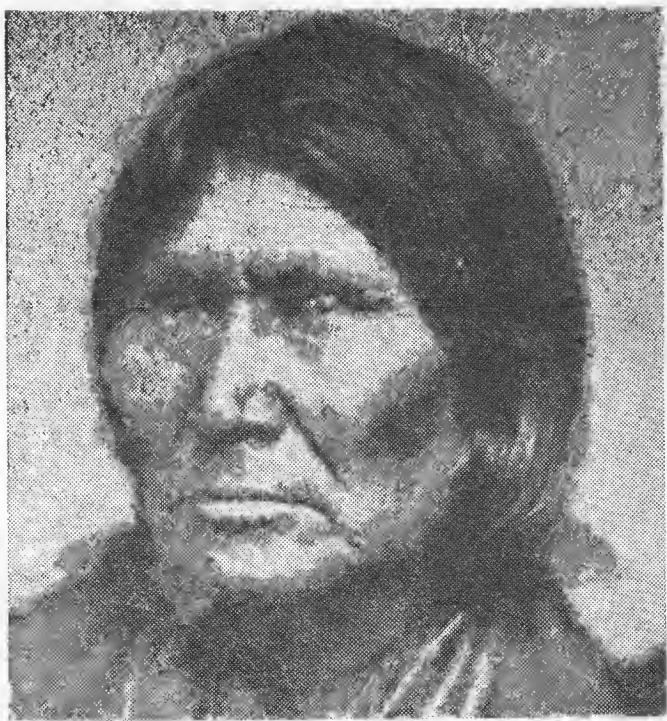
On the Comanche Trail grandfather perfected scouting as a somewhat forbidden art. Forbidden because his father mindful of the Indian danger, issued stern instructions for his younger boys to pot quails and jackrabbits elsewhere.

Texas was now in the Union by grace of the Mexican War. Often Dick ran into patrols of the celebrated Ranger force searching for Comanche horse thieves. As he kept growing, he determined to be a Ranger himself and help redeem Texas from the depredations of the wild tribe.

He met another boy of the Texas hills, Lonnie Moore ("Lonnie's Magic Gun," *REAL WEST*, March 1964), who'd been a Ranger at twelve. Lonnie was a sort of distant kinfolk for he was also from Kentucky and a cousin of Dan'l Boone. Through his influence, Dick was allowed to go on short patrols as a volunteer scout with detachments of the famous force, though its commanding officers would not make the exception for him that they'd made for Ranger Moore by signing him up a young-un as a regular recruit.

Yet Texas had never known a sharper scout than this descendant of civilized Indians when tracking savage ones. At fifteen, grandfather could cut sign on Comanches when other frontiersmen failed to see a flaked smidgeon of an arrow point or a speck of ash from some warrior's pipe on a clump of algerita bush. Under the tutelage of the Samsonesque Ranger, Big Foot Wallace, he developed into the best shot of the Travis County hills. By the time he was sixteen he could no longer be kept out of combat action though still but an unenlisted volunteer.

He started riding with Ranger patrols and civilian reinforcements after ravaging Indians in those hills where civilization was sinking its first uncertain roots. His uncanny ability at tracking resulted in Comanches being flushed from hidden nests along vague trails beaten out by the thinning buffalo. Neighbors said his ability came from "taking after Dan'l Boone" since he had Dan'l's "blood". Others claimed that scouting sense just came



Horse Back, Comanche chief, was enemy of Dick Preece.

natural for a boy with such a large splash of Cherokee blood.

SIX years passed. Kentucky was but a hazy memory of infancy to the quiet, serious boy with the sure eye and the certain trigger. Texas horse thieves started rampaging after Comanches had been briefly curbed. Dick rode with posses led by the Travis County sheriff after the mustang snatchers penning their catches in hidden corrals along the Colorado and Pedernales Rivers. He located the corrals and helped deliver ponies back to their rightful owners. Forever he cherished that dream of becoming a Texas Ranger.

Not until he was twenty-two could he ride into Austin

The Preece family, sired by Dick Preece, was large and from this group came many of Texas' most prominent citizens.





Bill Preece (above), brother of Dick Preece. Both helped blaze new trails in Texas. Below, Bill Saunders and Walt Durbin, Texas Rangers during era of grandfather Preece.



and take the Ranger oath. His father, a staunch Union man, was afraid that Texas would pull away with a botched secessionist republic already being projected by cliques of slaveowning politicians. He wanted none of his boys serving in a force whose guns might be turned against the American nation.

In 1856 a Unionist leader, Elisha M. Pease, was inaugurated as the elected governor of Texas. Temporarily the forces of division were thwarted in the big maverick state. But not the forces of destruction.

From the Colorado River to the San Saba the powerful Comanches struck, with its war parties enlarged by bands of Kiowas, Apaches, and Caddoes. The object of the Comanche campaign, led by Chief Horse Back, was to wipe out all the white settlements in a tier of eight newly organized counties northwest of Austin. Arms and ammunition were being supplied them by the Comancheros. Whites who got their wares from crooked supply sergeants at federal army posts and sold them at smart profits to the rampant tribes.

These settlements were the newest border of civilization in the Lone Star state, a border that could advance no further if they were extinguished by the flaming arrows and the contraband belching guns. Unless the Indian offensive was crushed, a third of Texas would forever be closed to the whites.

From out of the stubbornly Unionist settlements of the Texas hills poured men, with the lean frames and lantern jaws of Kentucky and Tennessee, to hurl back Horse Back's devastating cavalry of braves. With them, in a special Ranger battalion, went grandfather and his brother, William Preece, called Little Will rather than Junior after the fashion of the frontier. They rode away with their father's blessing since it was a Unionist governor who had called them to arms.

Throughout one of the most grueling episodes in the whole history of Indian warfare, grandfather, Dick Preece, was a daring scout whose eyes scorched with fury whenever he reined in beside the corpse of a slaughtered citizen.

He blazed new trails and scouted old ones in his endless spying on war parties and on their cohorts, the traitorous gun runners. While Comanche guns slew and Comanche torches burnt, he was anywhere and everywhere over the hills and hollows of Brown and San Saba counties, the area of operations for his particular Ranger company.

Twice settlers, hunting lost stock, took potshots at him thinking from his dark face that he was a Comanche. Three times Comanches and Kiowas surrounded him in dense thickets of oak or cedar. Three times he shot or dodged his way out.

Inevitably now he began taking on the dimensions of a hero in a state whose outstanding heroes are forever its men-at-arms. Citations came his way for valor under fire, citations that were preserved in Ranger records till the old Texas capital burnt back in the '80s. The story got around that "Dick Preece could go where a goat couldn't" after he had scaled a needle-like peak in San Saba County to detect the war preparations of a Comanche band camped in a valley below. Because of his courage and shrewdness, he was given command of a special Ranger platoon to hunt down the most notorious of the Comancheros, an ex-convict named Lark Edwards. Assisting the slippery Mr. Edwards was an employee, recently graduated from horse thieving, known as Bart Jones.

For weeks, Dick, in stealthy Cherokee fashion, prowled the rivers of the San Saba bottoms trying to locate the camp of the gun traders. He finally spotted it on a flat plain conveniently enclosed by a thick mat of trees and bushes.

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faded daguerreotype of Little Jo when "he" made his debut in Buffalo. The eyes of the men were suspiciously damp as they looked at it. One blew his nose loudly and said, "Well, no matter what he war, he war shore a man to ride the river with."

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### MY GRANDFATHER DICK PREECE

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Dick's platoon closed it out on the crisp night of February, 5, 1858. Quietly, like stalking panthers, the Rangers approached the hidden mart of the Comancheros. Three Indian sentries were instantly put out of commission by sudden pistol-butt blows on unsuspecting heads. At a signal from grandfather, the Texans readied for battle. Leaving Little Will in charge, grandfather crawled on hands and knees in the direction of a covered wagon halted at the far end of the plain.

Cedar flares were burning in a tub of pitch tar for illumination. Standing in the vehicle's rear, the boss Comanchero was offering one weapon at a time in the tribal language which he spoke fluently. A suitable bid was followed by immediate delivery of the gun at the hands of Bart Jones, long on the uncaught list of the Texas Rangers.

Edwards reached from his stock to display a rusty firepiece that had seen service in the Mexican War, ten years before. "A brave gun for a brave warrior!" he declaimed. "It will bring its warrior many coups." His heavy paw fondled the barrel. "What am I offered?"

A Comanche sub-chief arose holding a tin cup brimming with firewater. "Ten buffalo hides," he shouted thickly. "Ten hides and a —"

From the thicket, Little Will took dead aim on the cup. His bullet entered one side of the cheap vessel and came out the other. The chief stood holding it in a bleary daze as the raw liquid splattered to the ground. The wagon started rolling with Mr. Edwards still clutching the outmoded rifle.

The Comanchero turned in amazement. A young fellow dark as the tribesmen but wearing ranch jeans instead of breech clout, was holding the doubled reins of the horses. His head was half-turned toward the startled Comanchero.

Recognition was immediate. "Dick Preece!" the gun runner screamed. "You god damned Cherokee breed." He reached toward his holstered gun. But the draw of "the Cherokee breed" was faster.

Lark Edwards, worst of the hill country Comancheros dropped across his stacks of condemned U.S. army rifles with a bullet from a Colt .45 in his guts. He squirmed once and gasped twice before his business career ended with his life.

Little Will's command charged on foot into the encampment. Rifle butt crashed against tomahawk. Half-drunk warriors proved to be half-fighters. One dead Comanche fell squarely across the open demijohn. It sagged and spilled its contents on the grass along with the corpse. Grandfather wiped the blood from a bullet scratch. Then he lashed the horses to speed the contraband hardware and its expired owner toward the command post of his outfit further down the San Saba River.

When he arrived, he noticed a dozen Comanche prisoners taken in the battle of the plain. All of them had been among the soosed customers of the late Mr. Edwards. Grandfather was destined to collect a near reward for bringing in the gun peddler long wanted dead or alive, but preferably dead. He learned, however that Bart Jones had escaped during the surprise raid.

Grandfather said to the Ranger captain, playing another of those shrewd hunches. "Captain, that polecat made off with the warriors we didn't catch. He couldn't do anything else because any settler would shoot him on sight."

Then he added, "I'll go get Mr. Jones."

He made good his word. He led his platoon toward the ancient Indian "paint mine" on lengthy Jim Ned Creek in what is now Taylor County, Texas. Actually the site was not a mine at all, but a series of colored rock outcroppings from which the tribes extracted the gaudy "paint" with which they smeared their faces.

A week after the slaying of Lark Edwards, the Texans came upon a large party of Comanches camped by the "mine." Women and children were in the band. A Ranger, Jim Rogers, later dishonorably discharged, began aiming at the youngsters as the corps charged into the cluster of teepees.

Dick raised his winchester and spurred his horse toward this fellow whom he'd never rated as Ranger material, "Damn it, Jim Rogers!" he shouted. "I'll blast your addled brains out if you so much as draw on another young un."

Twenty women and tots were captured by the outfit. These would be



William Preece, Jr. made a name for himself on the Texas Ranger rolls.

exchanged later for white captives known to be held by the Comanches. As fifty braves rode away hotly pursued by Rangers, grandfather spotted a white man hiding in a cluster of mesquite trees. He fired a warning shot and called.

"Come out, Bart Jones. Come out unless you want me to go in and bring you out."

Sobbing and quivering, the Comanchero emerged from the mesquite grove.

His neck was doomed as he made the surrender. But grandfather and his comrades were out of the Texas Rangers by the time that he swung from a gallows in San Saba town.

The platoon returned to camp. There they received not congratulations, from a new commander, but final pay and orders to turn in their commissions.

IN another shift of volcanic Texas politics, all pro-Union men were being discharged from the Rangers. For these were fighters respecting the flag of an indivisible United States as well as the flag of Texas. And there was no more articulate Unionist in the whole Ranger establishment than Dick Lincoln Preece.

Stunned and saddened, the Preece brothers rode homeward through settlements which they had helped free of the Comanche scourge. As they journeyed, grandfather kept hearing drums of war echoing in those keen ears of his.

Yet this time it wasn't the Comanche drums he had listened to so often from some place of concealment in grass patch or canyon. They were the drums of domestic warfare: of country man butchering countryman, of one half of America locked in furious combat with the other half.

But Texas, that young and most peculiar state of the Union, was half-slave and half-free. Cotton country and slave labor country it was in its fertile and low lying eastern half. Cow country and free labor country it was in its western and mountainous section.

But it prairie men clashed with mountain men over the issues splitting the country, the Comanches would stage an orgy of blood across both prairies and mountains.

By 1859 most of the wild tribesmen had been driven to a reservation set aside for them by the federal government in the Wichita Mountains of eastern Territory. By 1860 only a few roving bands remained in the remote, unsettled Texas panhandle.

By 1861-

That year the Union fell apart. And so did Texas. Abraham Lincoln was inaugurated as president of the crumbling nation. That ugly shambles we call the Civil War began. Across Red River, into their old domain of the Lone Star state, rode the Comanches.

County after county in the western half of Texas voted against secession including Travis County of the Preeces and of Austin, the capital. Thousands of Union men, including distinguished ex-Rangers like Dick Preece, refused, from principle, to fight in the armies of the foredoomed southern Confederacy. But grandfather and other loyalist leaders hoped that all Texas, whether Unionist or Confederate, might unite in common defense against the new onslaught of the returning Comanches.

The dice rolled differently.

Grandfather with his outstanding Ranger record found himself a fugitive from men wearing the Ranger badges. That many of these wore it unworthily is now generally admitted. Giving grandfather the most trouble was a pathological character named Jeff Maltby who had his special sick reason for hating the Preeces.

Maltby was a native of Springfield, Illinois, where he had known and feared the town's leading citizen, Abraham Lincoln. Lincoln, it is said, had once re-



Elizabeth Preece, wife of William.

presented a man who had beaten the hot tempered sadist Maltby, in a lawsuit. After coming to Texas, the unpopular drifter had reputedly tried to enlist time and time again with the Rangers. He blamed grandfather for blocking the way.

Three months after Fort Sumter, grandfather who'd tacked up reward posters for so many wanted men, was seeing billets with his own name tacked on the trees of the hill country. "A deserter from conscription" — he was branded. The designation made him feel proud even when he had to keep shifting his residence from one Bull Creek cave to another.

May Preece, wife of grandfather.



Yet from other such "deserters" and lots of them ex-Rangers he found one of the most effective of the Loyalist resistance groups springing up in the rebellious south from Virginia to Texas. "The Mountain Eagles" his corps was called because the eagle was the emblem of the American republic to which its members would not foreswear allegiance.

Time and time again Maltby, the northern-born leader of Confederate irregulars, invaded the hills looking for boys to conscript in the Confederate armies and stock to be requisitioned for the confederate state "home guards." Time and time again, grandfather, the southern-born chieftain of Unionist irregulars, blocked him.

Maltby scored some triumphs, but he never conquered that detached, unsurrendering patch of the United States which was Bull Creek. Grandfather, the very symbol of the Loyalist counter rebellion, turned caves into citadels which belched death on the mounted thugs every time they rode into the hills. Within the dense caverns he cached stocks of rifles and ammunition supplied to him through the widespread Unionist underground operating from Mexico, across the far away Rio Grande River, but honeycombing western Texas with clandestine political organizations and bands of sure trigger bush fighters.

Grandfather became one of the finest sharp shooters and best scouts in a Unionist regular outfit, the First Texas Cavalry of the Federal Army, after the Mountain Eagles were drafted into official service by Colonel Andrew J. Hamilton appointed by President Lincoln to head a sort of a state government functioning underground from ranch to ranch in far western Texas.

**B**UT while Unionist Texans and Confederate Texans slew each other on common battlegrounds in swampy Louisiana, the Comanches were once more burning and slaughtering. They crossed Red River from Indian Territory in boisterous phalanxes of death. They rode and burnt and raped over a quarter of the state. And if little actual Yankee-Confederate fighting took place on Texas soil, the state knew the far greater horror of renewed Indian warfare.

Two years grandfather had served as a Unionist regular, two years as a Unionist guerilla, when Lee's courageous, weary Confederate remnant surrendered at Appomattox on April 9, 1865. Grandfather was 33. It was an age when a man should be thinking of building for himself a home and a family. But safety for wife and child and doorsill required the absence of Comanches.

In 1866, grandfather married a pretty

girl, Kate Shannon, from a family of Missouri Unionists which had emigrated to Texas. Then grandfather went about performing his last great service for Texas helping to quell the last, long desperate invasion of the Comanches.

He rode on patrol after patrol to track down the tribesmen roaming the Texas hills till they would be driven north on their final trek across the old Comanche Trail in 1871. Four years later, the last Comanche hold-outs under the mixed blood chief, Quanah Parker, would capitulate in the Panhandle.

As the years went by, grandfather's family multiplied like his herds of cattle and goats and horses. The Comanche Trail faded. But a spur of the Texas Trail, which connected with the Chisholm Trail of the longhorns ran near his ranch.

He became one of the main suppliers of horses for the big drives of Texas cattle to Kansas. Each spring, his boys rounded up herds of wild ponies in the canyons and cedar brakes, broke them and sold them to trail bosses.

Wounds suffered during the Civil War kept Uncle Dick, as everybody called him, from riding the longhorn trails and this was a sore grievance to him. But many a fledgling Texas Ranger dropped off at his ranch to seek instruction in the law of outlaw trails. Two of his brothers, Frank and Little Will, became county lawmen.

He was a distant cousin by marriage of the infamous bandit, Sam Bass, killed at Round Rock, not far from his Travis County ranch, during July of 1878. And it was he who kept some of his hot headed, romantic young nephews from "avenging" Sam's death at the guns of Texas Rangers.

"Sam Bass ain't no kinfolks you boys can be proud of," he said firmly. "He was a bad man and the Rangers did nothing but their duty when they gunned him down."

Grandfather lived on till 1906 when he succumbed to pneumonia. The news spread across the West that Dick Preece, another hero of the Union, was dead. Ex-Confederates who'd ridden with him after gunslingers, white and red, sorrowed with ex-Unionists. By order of Governor Sam Lanham, the Lone Star Flag was lowered at half-mast over the imposing modern capital in Austin.

"Uncle Dick Preece was a great Ranger and a great pioneer," said Governor Lanham, himself a Confederate veteran. "He stretched the Boone Trail from Kentucky to Texas."

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blasting hell out of the Texans when two important changes took place.

First, Gen. Sibley, staggering from his medicine and illness, retired to an ambulance and turned his command over to Col. Thomas Jefferson Green at 1:30 in the afternoon. Sibley was once described as an officer "whose love of liquor exceeded that for home, country or God."

Second, Col. Canby arrived on the scene to personally direct the Union forces.

The two sides were roughly parallel to each other on the east bank of the river, the Union troops with their backs to it. Canby's first order was to move McRae's battery to the left, with the idea of crushing the Texas flank and pushing it into the center. Good strategy, but it didn't work.

While the Union troops galloped around in general confusion, the Texans quietly formed behind a ridge of sand. 250 Rebels prepared to charge the two howitzers on the Union right while 750 prepared to take the more dangerous guns McRae's. They were not quite unseen, but it was close enough.

The two guns on the right were guarded by dismounted cavalry and infantry, including Paddy Graydon's spy company and Kit Carson's New Mexican Volunteers. They turned back the mob of charging Texans, inflicting heavy losses. Only a few of the New Mexican Volunteers ran, and they were shot by Kit Carson.

**A**TTENTION was centered on that fight when a pack of 750 shouting Rebels charged McRae's guns. Stopping only to fire their shotguns and rifles they swept toward McRae in a surging mass before reinforcements could get near. Clubbing and slashing with rifles and Bowie knives, the frenzied Rebels overran the guns, killing the gunners.

Major Lockridge, leading the charge, found himself face to face with Captain McRae, who was standing with one hand on the cascabel of his cannon. His other arm hung limp, shattered by a bullet.

"Surrender, McRae," shouted Lockridge. "I don't want to kill you!"

"I won't leave the guns," said McRae, grabbing his pistol.

Lockridge fired quickly and immediately was hit by a bullet himself. Both bodies slumped across the cannon, their blood flowing together along the barrel. At the time it was thought that they had killed each other, but it was

later found that McRae's pistol had not been fired. Someone else had hit Lockridge. This cannon, after the campaign, was on display in El Paso for many years. It was "borrowed" for use during a Mexican revolution but returned to its place in El Paso. It was scrapped during World War II. The blood stains of McRae and Lockridge were reported still visible as late as 1905.

The Rebels quickly reversed the cannons and used them on the Yankees who were advancing. One Texas Lieutenant, caught without a ramrod, substituted a flagstaff.

Canby, shaken by the loss of the cannons and the defeat of his troops in that area, sounded retreat.

Many of the volunteers had fled pell-mell toward the river, taking some panicky regulars with them. Canby blamed his defeat on the failure of the New Mexican Volunteers.

At the same time, however, regulars and New Mexican Volunteers were in hot pursuit of the Texans at the other end of the battlefield. Those who had turned the charge pursued the Rebels, shooting and slashing until the Texans were "making a regular Ranger rush to the rear." The Yankees were about to make the slaughter complete when they heard the bugle signal retreat and looked back to see the rest of the troops leaving the battlefield.

Cursing Canby, they abandoned their own fight and carefully moved back. They made fine targets in the chest-high Rio Grande as they crossed under heavy Rebel fire.

Map showing route of Sibley.

